

## Silence and Familial Homophobia in Colm Tóibín's "Entiendes" and "One Minus One"<sup>1</sup>

*José Carregal-Romero*

Universidade de Vigo (<jcarregal@uvigo.es>)

*Abstract:*

The present study focuses on two of Colm Tóibín's gay short-stories – "Entiendes" (1993) and "One Minus One" (2010) – in which the homosexual son meditates on his attachment to the dead mother. In both texts, Tóibín characterises the mother-son bond as being fraught with silence, resentment and lack of communication. In "One Minus One" and "Entiendes", the son's closeted homosexuality coexists with familial legacies of shame, uneasiness and duplicity. The central characters in the two texts are similar, as they experience the same type of existential exile, solitude and alienation derived from their complex attachments to home and family. As shall be explained, the author dwells on the damaging effects of familial homophobia, highlighting the limitations of the dominant heteronormative family model to accommodate gay sensibilities.

*Keywords:* Colm Tóibín, "Entiendes", Homosexuality, Ireland, "One Minus One"

In his gay fiction, Colm Tóibín has often explored aspects connected with familial homophobia, the fear of rejection and the taboo of homosexuality. The present study will concentrate on two short-stories – "Entiendes" (1993) and "One Minus One" (*The Empty Family*, 2010) – in which the homosexual

<sup>1</sup> The research carried out for this paper was funded by the Autonomous Government of Galicia, Spain (*Axudas Posdoutorais* 2017). This essay is also part of the research project FFI2017-84619-P, funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad and ERDF and the ED431D2017/17, Rede de Investigación de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade III, Xunta de Galicia. This study was written while I was doing a research stay at University College Dublin. I would like to express my gratitude to the English Department – and, more specifically, to Prof. Anne Fogarty – for their generosity.

son meditates on his attachment to the dead mother. In both texts, Tóibín portrays the mother-son bond as being fraught with silence, resentment and lack of communication, with mother and son employing strategies of avoidance and self-protection in order to deal with feelings that cannot be talked about. Both “Entiendes” and “One Minus One” feature protagonists who experience familial despondency, solitude and exile, as well as a half-hidden longing for the dead mother. In both cases, sexuality emerges as one of the raw areas between the son and the mother.

Typically in his fiction, Tóibín offers depictions of motherhood which clearly undermine the stereotype of the nurturing and self-sacrificing mother, the most obvious example being the rebellious Katherine Proctor in *The South* (1990), who abandons her ten year old son for a new life in Spain. Furthermore, as John McCourt has also observed, most of Tóibín’s fictional mothers and sons become entangled in “a question of finding, claiming and maintaining an independent personal space in which to live and develop” (2008, 154). In this battle for a “personal space”, mothers and sons try to evade each other’s influence. This kind of strained mother-son bond is a recurrent topic in many of Tóibín’s narratives, either from the perspective of the mother or the son. For example, in his recent novels *The Testament of Mary* (2012) and *Nora Webster* (2014), the subjectivity of the mother takes central stage, whereas many of the short-stories in *Mothers and Sons* (2006) and *The Empty Family* (2010) are focalised through the viewpoint of the son. Both perspectives – the mother’s and the son’s – are present in his latest novel, *The House of Names* (2017). Fathers – with the notable exception of judge Eamon Redmond in *The Heather Blazing* (1992) – become secondary, shadowy or absent characters in Tóibín’s canon; their subjectivity is usually displaced from the core of the story.

In her essay “After Oedipus? Mothers and Sons in the Fiction of Colm Tóibín” (2008), Anne Fogarty becomes one of the first critics to examine the mother figure as “a perennial and recurrent motif in Tóibín’s novels” (168). In her study, Fogarty calls attention to the difficult bond between the mother and the gay son in Tóibín’s texts, observing how the son’s desire for freedom and emancipation is often countermanded by the confining presence of the mother. Fogarty further argues that, even when the mother is dead or absent, her memory becomes the repository of much regret and frustration: “The secluded, hostile space of the maternal [...] becomes the locus in which all the conflicts engendered by the family are reinforced and in which the insidious effects of homophobia inscribe themselves” (177). Significantly, as Fogarty suggests, a past of familial homophobia shapes the subjectivity of many of Tóibín’s gay characters, who maintain a painful yet loving attachment to the mother.

Interestingly, the family becomes a prominent topic in much of the gay literature produced in the last decades of the twentieth century – and Tóibín’s gay fiction is no exception to this. In his seminal *A History of Gay Literature* (1998), Gregory Woods develops the following idea:

Gay literature has had a great deal to say about families. Indeed, the family is one of our principal themes. In the first place, it has constantly to be reiterated that homosexual women and men actually come from within families. Families create us, for the most part (though I am not saying that they *cause* us). In the second, we either come to an accommodation with those families, or we distance ourselves from them, or they reject and eject us. In the third, many of us create families of our own, or we find ourselves inventing new configurations of relationships which might be called alternative families. (345; emphasis in the original)

Tóibín – who praised Woods’s study in an article for the *London Review of Books* (Tóibín 1999) – clearly draws on this notion of the “alternative family” when in *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) he surrounds Declan, an AIDS victim, with two gay friends who have taken care of him during the earlier stages of his disease, at a time when his biological family was unaware of his health condition. In the course of the story, “the friends’ love for Declan and their cooperation with his hitherto distant family become central to the novel’s ethics of inclusion and reconciliation” (Carregal-Romero 2016, 371).

What both Woods’s quote and Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* also suggest is that, even if homosexuals can create in due time their own alternative families, most of them keep strong emotional ties to their biological family. As can be inferred, the nuclear family often becomes an intimate but conflictive arena for many homosexuals, whose sexuality necessarily implies a breakaway from the established path of heterosexuality. Because of its disciplinary role, the family often becomes the primary site where the lesbian daughter or gay son learns the lessons of self-acceptance or repression with regard to her/his sexuality. The possibility of rejection – and the anxiety it brings – becomes another reality frequently shared by many homosexuals, for whom “the unconditional love that is stereotypically perceived to characterize and symbolize biological kinship loses much of its ‘unconditional’ or ‘naturally given’ quality” (Xhonneux 2014, 125).

Familial homophobia should be understood within a cultural climate in which parents – most frequently, mothers – were blamed for their children’s homosexuality. For most of the twentieth century, parents of gays and lesbians were made to feel ashamed and inadequate on account of their children’s sexuality, since “psychiatrists throughout the world treated homosexuality as an illness primarily caused by poor parenting” (Meem, Gibson and Alexander 2010, 68). Misconceptions and negative stereotypes about homosexuality have thus greatly affected these parents’ appreciations of their children’s sexuality – a situation which caused much suffering and incomprehension within families.

In *The Ties that Bind: Familial Homophobia and its Consequences* (2009), Sarah Schulman perceptively argues that “homophobia originates and is enforced, initially, within the family”, which becomes “the primary source of pain and diminishment in the lives of many gay people” (33). Schulman then

highlights the interconnectedness between familial and social homophobia when she comments that, for many heterosexuals, the family provides “the model for social exclusion, for it is also where most straight people learn to use homophobia to elevate themselves within the family politic, which is the prototype for the broader social politic” (33). Familial homophobia, Schulman adds, has lasting and painful consequences for homosexuals, as the lesbian/gay person experiences diminishment and “learns to tolerate this or be complicit with it in order to be loved [by her/his family]” (23).

As will be argued in what follows, in “One Minus One” and “Entiendes” Tóibín brings to light the pernicious effects of familial homophobia. In the two stories, the son’s closeted homosexuality coexists with familial legacies of silence, uneasiness and duplicity. In both cases, the gay son has not broken bonds with the dead mother, and this loss revives feelings of melancholia, as well as the painful irreversibility of past wrongdoings.

“Entiendes” is Tóibín’s first gay narrative and was published in 1993 in a collection entitled *Infidelity*, edited by Marsha Rowe, a supporter of gay rights and a feminist who “had been involved in the very early women’s movement in England” (O’Toole 2008, 193). “Entiendes” is set in Buenos Aires, and the story foreshadows the type of complex mother-son bond that Tóibín would also explore in many of his later gay fictions set in Ireland and elsewhere, such as *The Story of the Night*, *The Blackwater Lightship*, “Three Friends” and “A Long Winter” (both in *Mothers and Sons*, 2006) or “One Minus One”. No critic, to my knowledge, has worked on Tóibín’s “Entiendes” so far.

Being his first gay story, “Entiendes” broke new ground in Tóibín’s fiction in 1993, the year when male homosexuality ceased to be illegal in Ireland. As a homosexual who grew up in a dark time for gays and lesbians, Tóibín declared that, before 1993, “the laws forbidding us to love, forbidding us to couple as others do, affected us” (“A Brush with the Law”, 2007). Criminalisation made male homosexuality an offence against society and, thus, had a devastating effect on the lives of gay men. Though lesbianism was not criminal<sup>2</sup>, lesbians were similarly discriminated, as their sexuality was seen to defy Ireland’s family-centered values<sup>3</sup>. Only twenty-two years later, in May 2015, Ireland became the first country to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote<sup>4</sup>. “Internationally”, as Patrick James McDonagh highlights,

<sup>2</sup> There were two attempts (1895 and 1922) to make lesbianism a crime. See Walshe 1997, 6.

<sup>3</sup> In *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland*, Joni Crone argues that coming out to the family is often a more complex issue for lesbians than for gay men: “We are ordinary women, and as ordinary women, reared in heterosexual families, we have been socialized into a mothering role as helpers, assistants and carers. ‘Coming out’ as an Irish lesbian involves undoing much of our conditioning” (1995, 61).

<sup>4</sup> The result of the referendum – 62% for same-sex marriage – might be surprising given the recent history of entrenched homophobia in Ireland – in the early 2000s, research conducted

“Ireland received widespread admiration as a beacon for LGTB civil rights” (2017, 66). Though homophobia still lingers today in Ireland (it remains particularly strong in primary and secondary school environments<sup>5</sup>), “the huge changes in sexual mores and family life over the last decades brought about [...] a significant lessening of discrimination against lesbians and gay men” (Nolan 2007, 357).

Despite this changing social climate, Tóibín’s portrayals of homosexuality are often coloured by his own experiences as a gay man in the Ireland of his youth. As he admits in *Love in a Dark Time* (2001), Tóibín grew up at a time when homosexuality “was not allowed for as a possibility” (275), a fact which affected him as a gay man: “My sexuality [...] was something about which part of me remained uneasy, timid and melancholy” (2). In an interview, Tóibín also comments on the work of younger homosexual writers and remarks that: “In Keith Ridgway’s *The Long Falling*, the gay characters have a wonderfully easy time in Dublin. They try to liberate the older generation [...] Emma Donoghue, similarly, has a much more open universe. I’m just slightly too old to have experienced this liberation so that it fundamentally entered my spirit” (Canning 2003, 202). In most of Tóibín’s gay narratives, his protagonists are not entirely freed from the emotional constraints of the past. As Eibhear Walshe astutely observes, Tóibín’s gay fiction reflects “the ambivalence in any new recognition of diverse sexual identities within a culture and a literature” (2013, 69). Far from producing celebratory portrayals of gay liberation, Tóibín often dwells on the harmful effects of a painful past of shame, silence and exclusion surrounding homosexuality, on the level of the individual and the family<sup>6</sup>.

As he also does in his 1996 novel *The Story of the Night*<sup>7</sup>, Tóibín locates “Entiendes” in the Argentina of the mid-1970s, during the period of the mili-

in twenty-four countries concluded that Ireland was one of the most homophobic nations in the Western world, together with Greece and Northern Ireland (see Ferriter 2009, 509). In *Ireland Says Yes* (2016), Gráinne Healy, Brian Sheehan and Noel Whelan underline that there is today in Ireland a notable generational gap, as younger people grew up at a time when sexuality was more openly discussed. In general, younger people were strongly supportive and enthusiastic about marriage equality: “Younger voters had come of age in a more liberal era. They saw this referendum as being more important than elections” (Healy, Sheehan, Whelan 2016, 41).

<sup>5</sup> See O’Higgins-Norman 2009; Mannix-McNamara *et al.* 2013 and Bird 2016, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> A clear exception to this is Tóibín’s semi-autobiographical short-story “Barcelona, 1975” (*The Empty Family* 2010), where a young gay man enjoys his sexual liberation away from home and Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> After he published “Entiendes”, Tóibín reworked and expanded this short-story and turned it into his first gay novel, *The Story of the Night*. Unlike the short-story, the novel features a protagonist, Richard, who is half English, whose father is dead and whose mother is an English woman who lives alienated from the Argentinian society.

tary regime, when political dissidents were tortured and murdered<sup>8</sup>. The narrator in “Entiendes” briefly reflects upon this past of violence in Argentina, coming to the conclusion that “we saw nothing, not because there was nothing, but because we had trained ourselves not to see [...] It was something in the atmosphere, something unsaid and all-pervasive” (14). In the story, Tóibín connects Argentina’s social climate of denial and alienation with the narrator’s personal experiences as a gay man. Just as the murders executed by the generals were invisible to the wider society, homosexuality was similarly regarded as clandestine, a social reality whose existence was surrounded by a culture of silence. Tóibín himself relates how, during his time in 1980s Argentina, “[he] kept meeting gay people who had never told a single person that they were gay [...] and they would tell you, ‘no one knows and no one will ever know’” (O’Toole 2008, 196). Significantly, as Kathleen Costello-Sullivan notes in her analysis of *The Story of the Night*, Tóibín’s portrayal of gay sexuality in Argentina clearly reflects a similar situation in Ireland, when gay sexuality was still criminal: “Given the slowly-dawning realization of equality for gay members of Irish society and the social and political exclusions which that history entailed, the representation of Argentina’s oppressive, silencing polity invariably resonates with the Irish context” (2012, 98).

“Entiendes” is narrated from the point of view of a son coming to terms with the death of his mother. All the events are recounted in retrospective, as if the passing of time had brought some clarity over the past: “She has been dead now for some years; her bones are firmly locked away in the family vault” (10). We learn that the protagonist in “Entiendes” has grown up as the sheltered son of his lonely mother. For reasons unknown to the narrator, the father disappeared long ago, never to come back: “I expected a postcard to come in the door some morning with news from him, as I have done all my adult life. A card in our box in the hallway. One card” (25). On this subject and others, the mother zealously guarded her privacy, reluctant as she was to speak about the man who had abandoned her.

In “Entiendes”, Tóibín constructs the mother as a woman trapped in a kind of internal exile, confined in a world from which there is no possi-

<sup>8</sup> Working as a journalist, Tóibín attended in the 1980s the trial of the generals who had committed the assassinations of political dissidents, expressing the view that: “The generals took over power determined to rid Argentina of its political opponents. Bodies were found but there wasn’t much publicity. Life continued as normal, as it did elsewhere in Europe under similar circumstances. Those who drew attention to what was happening were accused of offering aid to the subversives. When the armed forces came in the night and dragged off a member of the family, the family called the police, they tried to make statements in police stations, they hired lawyers and went to the courts; they applied over and over for *habeas corpus*; they believed the system was still working. Nobody knew what was happening and if people had been told they wouldn’t have believed it” (1990, 21).

bility of escape or self-reinvention. In her attempt to recuperate her old life as a writer<sup>9</sup>, the mother retreats to her study and begins to rewrite her published novels: “She wrote nothing new, but took down all the old books and reworked them as though there was a chance that some publisher would bring them out in a new version” (9). Her isolation comes to an end when the mother falls in the shower and breaks her hip. The son now regrets: “I needed to be with her so I dropped some hours at the Academia San Martín [...] I helped Mother to dress, and wheeled her about the apartment as she pleased” (16). This new proximity is spiced with a sense of oppression, as the narrator readily complains about his “greedy, capricious mother” (18). Nonetheless, Tóibín characterises the bond between mother and son as being so intense that, years after her death, the protagonist senses the mother’s presence within the rooms of the apartment. Though he acknowledges his need to relocate his loss emotionally, the son is not ready to distance himself from the influence of the mother: “Some day soon I will open the curtains and let her fly out” (27).

In “Entiendes”, the son’s closeted homosexuality ironically brings him closer to the mother. This particular connection between gay children and the biological family is explored by Barry McCrea in his analysis of family narratives in modernist fictions. McCrea posits the following idea: “Breaking out of one’s birth family seems to be structurally connected with heterosexuality. Paradoxically, gays seem fated to be structurally chained to the birth family forever” (2011, 13). As McCrea suggests, heterosexuality is culturally associated with marriage and the founding of new families. Homosexuals, however, have been traditionally deprived of these possibilities. In places where heterosexism remains the norm, homophobia flourishes and same-sex desire becomes difficult to accept on both a personal and social level. In his fictional 1970s Buenos Aires, Tóibín portrays gay sexuality as an experience about which nobody speaks, and this has the direct consequence of preventing homosocial bonding. In the story, Tóibín has his narrator interacting with potential lovers – strangers he meets on the street or in other public spaces – through silent signs just to engage in anonymous sex, the sexual companions behaving as if they were “conspirators laden down with desire” (15). This type of sex, Tim Edwards explains, has to be understood within the social, economic, and political contexts constructing codes and sexual

<sup>9</sup> Because of social conventions, the mother in “Entiendes” had stopped writing when she got married, abandoning her literary career. This brings echoes of Tóibín’s words about his own mother: “My mother had published poems before she was married, in the *Irish Press*. She had cut those poems out, and she kept her books apart from my father’s [...] She knew a lot of poetry. But the fact that she had stopped writing, I think, was on her mind, always. That she could have, if circumstances had been different, that she could have been a different sort of person” (O’Toole 2008, 185).

activities. This “pick up” system, Edwards argues, emerges from the “erotization of the inequality of gay sexuality” and becomes a counter-reaction to the oppression and regulation of same-sex desire (1994, 89). In Tóibín’s short-story, the shame and silence surrounding same-sex desire has a strong effect on the narrator’s personal life. In such a context, I contend, the narrator can hardly establish affective ties with other gay men in a way that could allow him to construct an independent sphere of intimacy away from the engulfing presence of the mother.

In his search for love and companionship, the narrator develops a romantic and sexual interest in his closest friend, Jorge. His encounters with him are filled with silent expectation: “I listened for a clue that Jorge might understand [...] *Entiendes?* You could ask and this would mean Do you? Are you? Will you? [...] Sometimes I became tense with worry that I might blurt it out” (11). The narrator’s hopes are shattered when he summons up the courage to confess his sexuality, trying to find out whether Jorge is also gay. To his dismay, Jorge’s only reaction is to express preoccupation for his friend’s mother: “I needed to tell him how much I had wanted him, how my hopes had depended on him and that now things would change and I did not know how. But he was worried about my mother [...] It was hard for my mother, he said” (18). As Tóibín shows in his story, Jorge does not repudiate his friend, but, like many other people of his time, he can only see homosexuality as a burden and a source of shame for the family.

Later in the story, the protagonist cannot contain his turmoil when the mother starts to worry about Jorge’s continuing visits: “Had it ever occurred to me, she asked, that [Jorge] was homosexual, and that was why he came?” (20). Now that the mother breaks the taboo of homosexuality, the son discloses the secret of his gay orientation. Even if the son shows his vulnerability and “stand[s] in front of her shaking” (20), the mother maintains her customary remoteness and coldness. Her indignation, though, cannot be hidden: “Somewhere in her face there was utter contempt” (21).

Despite her indignation, the mother begins to display an interest in her son’s life and encourages him to confess his most intimate experiences. Bemused, the son accedes to her request and starts confiding in her: “We were actors in that beautiful old tiled hallway night after night as we settled down to lurid tales of a wayward son at home and on his travels” (21). These “lurid tales” include his trip to Barcelona, as well as the sexual liberation he enjoyed “away from [his] country and [his] family” (17). Strangely, the mother’s willingness to know about her son does not translate into a new openness towards him. In fact, as she begins to come to terms with her son’s homosexuality, she refuses to express her feelings: “She said nothing to me about what I told her. I did not know – indeed, I do not know – what she thought of me, whether she was shocked and disturbed, or relieved or amused by the stories I told her” (24).



In the final part of the story, Tóibín unveils the secret of the father's disappearance by having the protagonist going through her late mother's papers in her study. There, the son discovers one of her mother's manuscripts, in which she tells the story of his parents' honeymoon in Barcelona. As the narration progresses, the son is startled to find out that,

In her story the husband one day leaves his newly wedded wife in the hotel and walks into the city. It is late, according to her story [...] As I read, I realised the scene she was now setting, the event she was recounting. As I read, I followed my own account of my life in the city. (26)

In this tale, the husband walks out deep in the night into the company of other men – just as the narrator had done during his time in Barcelona. The father's alleged homosexuality is thus disclosed by the mother's belated confession. Now that he has discovered the secret, the son experiences a kind of communion with his lost mother: "Everything became clear about her [...] She was in the room hovering as if she were in every cell of my body" (26).

As is revealed, the mother blocked the son from the knowledge of his father's sexual proclivities and his reasons for deserting the family. Though Tóibín leaves us with no insight into the mother's subjectivity and provides no further comments, I would suggest that the mother's strategic use of silence comes to represent the containment of sexual realities whose very existence is hard to accept, on a personal and social level. Now that the father's sexuality has been disclosed, the son is left with a legacy of frustration, family fragmentation and abandonment. Ultimately, through the figures of the isolated mother and the tormented son, Tóibín foregrounds the crippling power of the shame and silence surrounding homosexuality.

Like "Entiendes", "One Minus One" revolves round the troubled relationship between a gay son and his already dead mother. The story is a first person narrative of a middle-aged man living in Guadalupe (Texas), who finds himself haunted by painful memories: "My mother is six years dead tonight, and Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep" (1). The protagonist's words are imaginarily transmitted to a former boyfriend of his, the person to whom he confessed all his fears and worries: "I wish I had you here, and I wish that I had not called you those other times when I did not need to as much as I do now" (7).

As is soon discovered in "One Minus One", a kind of existential solitude becomes the permanent condition of the narrator, a man who lives far away from home, "in a place where so much is empty because it was never full, where things are forgotten and swept away" (10). In ways that are peculiarly relevant to Tóibín's character, Edward Said theorises that exilic figures "[are] always out of place" (2001, 180) and "feel their difference as a kind of orphanhood" (182). "What is true of all exile", Said further argues, "is not

that home and love are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (185). It transpires, then, that the exilic individual associates home and love with loss and, consequently, “homecoming is out of the question” (Said 179). As Julia Kristeva also explains in *Strangers to Ourselves*, the exile is free of ties, but “the consummate name of such a freedom is solitude” (1991, 12). Because of this solitude, Kristeva explains, the exilic subject goes through a state of “matricidal anguish” (9):

As far back as his memory can reach, it is delightfully bruised: misunderstood by a loved yet absent-minded, discreet, or worried mother, the exile is a stranger to his mother. He does not call her, he asks nothing of her. Arrogant, he proudly holds on to what he lacks, to absence, to some symbol or other. (5)

Interestingly, in “One Minus One” Tóibín seems to bring to the fore-front several of the characteristics described by Kristeva and Said with regard to exilic subjects, specifically their symbolic condition of homelessness and orphanhood. In the story, the narrator has experienced the death of the mother, and her memory revives bitter sentiments of regret and grief, coupled with a sense of emptiness. Simultaneously, this is also a narrative where, as is typical of Tóibín, “the desire for freedom and easeful self-erasure is countermanded by the incessant and insidious sway of the home, the past and the mother” (Fogarty 2008, 171).

As explained, in the story Tóibín has the narrator reminiscing about the death of his mother, which he defines as “the last real thing that happened to [him]” (1). The memory of this loss brings to his mind past rivalries, reproaches and envies. “One Minus One” is a story where much remains unexplained: we have, for example, little glimpses of sibling jealousy – “[Cathal] was the one [the mother] loved most” (9) – and the emotional disconnection shown by the sister, Sinead, who speaks of the family “as though it were as distant as the urban district council or the government or the United Nations” (4). Like his sister, the narrator has distanced himself from his family, both geographically and emotionally. After all, the narrator seeks emotional healing by talking to his absent former partner and not to his brother or sister, thus showing that his locus of intimacy is placed far away from the biological family.

As we soon learn, the narrator’s strained relation with the mother is linked to childhood trauma. This trauma originates from his father’s terminal illness and the long period that the parents spent away from home, when the protagonist and his brother, Cathal, were “deposited” (6) at their aunt’s house<sup>10</sup>. In his adulthood, the narrator still finds himself reconsidering how

<sup>10</sup> *The Blackwater Lightship* and *Nora Webster* feature almost identical episodes, with two small siblings spending time alone in the house of a relative whilst the parents spend time in Dublin for medical tests. In both cases, the father dies and the mother returns home

his childhood trauma “should be nothing, because it resembled nothing, just as one minus one resembles zero” (7). The protagonist, however, does have a painful connection to the past, as is illustrated by his difficult return to Ireland in the days when his mother was about to die. On his way across the Atlantic, he starts to cry inconsolably:

I could feel that this going home to my mother’s bedside would not be simple, that some of our loves and attachments are elemental and beyond our choosing, and for that very reason they come spiced with pain and regret and need and hollowness and a feeling as close to anger as I will ever be able to manage. (8)

Tóibín reflects here on the narrator’s primeval union with the mother and on the impossibility of breaking bonds with her, no matter how far away he had stayed. He now regrets his estrangement from her, coming to the awful realization that there will be no more possibilities to amend the mistakes of the past:

There would be no time any more for anything to be explained or said. We had used up all our time. And I wondered if that made any difference to my mother then, as she lay awake in the hospital those last few nights of her life: we had used up all our time. (10)

In his reunion with the mother, the son returns to the locus of the familiar: “I sat by her bed and spent a while wetting her lips. I was at home with her now” (11). His need for closeness is now fulfilled, but it brings with it the agony of imminent loss. The narrator acknowledges his failure to behave as “a good son” (12), but he still harbours his own grievances, lamenting that “[he] had been given no choice, that she had never wanted [him] very much, and that she was not going to be able to rectify that” (12).

Though the topic of sexuality is not as paramount in “One Minus One” as it is in “Entiendes”, homosexuality also emerges here as a taboo between mother and son. Tóibín portrays no images of outright rejection in this story, but the silence surrounding the protagonist’s sexuality becomes meaningful.

suffering from depression. As Tóibín has declared on several occasions, his own father suffered a stroke, spent several months in Dublin for tests and underwent a brain operation. All these events caused a childhood trauma whose repercussions reverberate in his fiction. As he explains: “I have a close relationship with silence, with things withheld, things known and not said. I am sure that no one said anything to me, for example, before I went into that room where I saw my father after the operation. And no one mentioned afterward that we would not easily be able to understand his speech [...] And then in July 1967 my father died. There was a funeral and the house was full of people, but there was silence again soon afterward [...] My younger brother and I stayed with my mother. We thought about my father, but we did not talk about him” (2015, 31-32).

Apparently, the narrator had kept his relationship with his former boyfriend apart from his family. At the mother's funeral, for example, they maintain a distance, as though they were strangers: "I looked for you among the crowd and could not see you as the hearse came after Mass" (1). He also remembers that: "A friend of my mother's, who noticed everything, came over and looked at you and whispered to me that it was nice that my friend had come. She used the word 'friend' with a sweet, insinuating tone" (2). This becomes a moment of recognition, albeit a veiled one. The use of the euphemism "friend" points to a reality of utter discretion concerning gay sexuality. In *Tóibín's* story, this sense of discretion and silence is heightened by the fact that not once is the word "gay" mentioned, nor are there any specific allusions to the narrator's and his former lover's time together as a couple.

As is disclosed, the mother knew about her son's homosexuality and talked about it with others, but the extent to which he was accepted in his family remains uncertain. What becomes clear is that the mother and the son did not seem to have grown close enough to overcome their familial estrangement: "I regretted how little she knew about me, as she too, must have regretted that, although she never complained or mentioned that" (9). Without explaining exactly why, the narrator tells his former partner that his mother had "never wanted [him] very much" (12) and that, in his family reunions, "[he] was protected from what might have been said, or not said" (12). It is also made clear that, despite his distance from the mother, the narrator had feared her rejection for long: "I imagined how coldly or nonchalantly a decision to spend the summer close by, seeing her often, might have been greeted by her, and how difficult and enervating for her" (12).

The story finishes with a scene recreating the mother's last moments before passing away. Because of this loss, an elemental part of the son's sense of self has gone away, never to be replaced: "We walked down the corridor as though for the rest of our lives our own breathing would bear traces of the end of hers, of her final struggle, as though our own way of being in the world had just been halved or quartered by what we had seen" (13). When he flies back to the United States, the narrator experiences a kind of bittersweet liberation from the anguish experienced at his mother's deathbed: "I would not be given a second chance. In the hours when I woke, I have to tell you that this struck me almost with relief" (13). Paradoxically, in the course of time, *Tóibín's* narrator achieves no such desired relief or liberation, as he finds himself six years later reviving the death of the mother, "as though no time had elapsed" (1).

As has been observed, *Tóibín's* main characters in "Entiendes" and "One Minus One" are defined by their urge to come to terms with the past; in both instances, the memory of the lost mother becomes the repository of regrets, missed chances and shameful silences within the family. Even if the plots of "Entiendes" and "One Minus One" differ in many aspects, both texts can be read as nuanced examinations of the mother-son bond in the face of trauma,

grief and the taboo of homosexuality. Therefore, as I have argued, in the two stories the central characters' subjectivity as gay men cannot be understood outside their familial history of silence and disaffection. Although they have become free from familial homophobia, Tóibín's protagonists seem to live with the consequences of a past of self-suppression.

For these protagonists, home and family do not become sources of comfort and unproblematic belonging, as is illustrated by their bond to the mother, tinged with contradictory feelings of necessity and repudiation. Far from Ireland, Tóibín's narrator in "One Minus One" lives in "a place where there is nothing" (10); his characterisation fits into Said's and Kristeva's conceptualisations of the exilic figure, an "orphan" for whom "love and home are lost" (Said 2001, 182) and who "holds on to what he lacks, to absence" (Kristeva 1991, 5). The same could be said about the emotional state of the protagonist in "Entiendes"; he, instead, inhabits a family home still haunted by the mother's ghost, as he acknowledges his necessity to evade her memory and "open the curtains and let her fly out" (27). In their alienation, the central characters in "One Minus One" and "Entiendes" are similar, experiencing a kind of existential solitude derived from their complex attachments to home and family. The two stories reveal a less than fulfilling and satisfactory relationship to the first love object – the mother. Ultimately, by foregrounding the silences and occlusions around the maternal relation, Tóibín exposes the corrosive effects of familial homophobia.

#### *Works Cited*

- Bird Charlie (2016), *A Day in May: Real Lives, True Stories*, Dublin, Merrion Press.
- Canning Richard (2003), *Hear us Out: Conversations with Gay Novelists*, New York, Columbia UP.
- Carregal-Romero José (2016), "The Cultural Narratives of AIDS, Gay Sexuality, and Family in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*", *PLL: Papers on Language and Literature* 52, 4, 350-373.
- Costello-Sullivan Kathleen (2012), *Mother/Country: Politics of the Personal in the Fiction of Colm Tóibín*, Bern, Peter Lang.
- Crone Joni (1995), "Lesbians: The Lavender Women of Ireland", in Íde O'Carroll, Eoin Collins (eds), *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards the Twenty-First Century*, London, Cassell, 60-70.
- Edwards Tim (1994), *Erotics & Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism*, London, Routledge.
- Ferriter Diarmaid (2009), *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, London, Profile Books.
- Fogarty Anne (2008), "After Oedipus? Mothers and Sons in the Fiction of Colm Tóibín", in Paul Delaney (ed.), *Reading Colm Tóibín*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 167-181.
- Healy Gráinne, Sheehan Brian, Whelan Noel (2016), *Ireland Says Yes: The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality Was Won*, Sallins, Merrion Press.

- Kristeva Julia (1991), *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Columbia UP.
- McCourt John (2008), "A Battle for Space: Mothers and Sons", in Paul Delaney (ed.), *Reading Colm Tóibín*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 149-165.
- McCrea Barry (2011), *In the Company of Strangers*, New York, Columbia UP.
- McDonagh P.J. (2017), "'Homosexuals Are Revolting' – Gay & Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s – 1990s", *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* 7, 65-91.
- Mannix-McNamara Patricia, O'Grady Emmanuel, Devaney Eva, Jourdan Didier (2013), "Tackling Social and Health Inequalities: Vulnerability among the Young Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Population in Ireland", *Psychology & Sexuality* 4, 3, 268-282.
- Meem Townsend Deborah, Gibson M.A., Alexander J.F. (2010), *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies*, London, SAGE.
- Nolan Emer (2007), "Postcolonial Literary Studies, Nationalism, and Feminist Critique in Contemporary Ireland", *Eire-Ireland* 42, 1&2, 336-361.
- O'Higgins-Norman James (2009), "Straight Talking: Explorations on Homosexuality and Homophobia in Secondary Schools in Ireland", *Sex Education* 9, 4, 381-393.
- O'Toole Fintan (2008), "Appendix: An Interview with Colm Tóibín", in Paul Delaney (ed.), *Reading Colm Tóibín*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 183-208.
- Said E.W. (2001), *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London, Granta Books.
- Schulman Sarah (2009), *The Ties that Bind: Familial Homophobia and its Consequences*, New York, The New Press.
- Tóibín Colm (1990), *The Trial of the Generals: Selected Journalism 1980-1990*, Dublin, Raven Arts Press.
- (1993), "Entiendes", in Marsha Rowe (ed.), *Infidelity*, London, Chatto & Windus, 9-27.
- (1999), "Roaming the Greenwood", *London Review of Books* 21, 2, 12-16.
- (2001), *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almodóvar*, London, MacMillan.
- (2007), "A Brush with the Law", *The Dublin Review* 28, <<http://thedublinreview.com/a-brush-with-the-law>> (05/2018).
- (2011), "One Minus One", in Id., *The Empty Family*, London, Penguin, 1-13.
- (2015), *On Elizabeth Bishop*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton UP.
- Walshe Eibhear (1997), "Introduction", in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, Cork, Cork UP, 1-15.
- (2013), *A Different Story: The Writings of Colm Tóibín*, New Bridge, Irish Academic Press.
- Woods Gregory (1998), *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*, New Haven, Yale UP.
- Xhonneux Lies (2014), "The Cruelty of Kin: Rejection and Abjection in Rebecca Brown's Representations of Parent-Child Relationships", *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 50, 115-137.